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THE GLOBAL THEOLOGY NETWORK

On the 30th of April – 2nd of May, 2009, a group of twenty leading research active professors of theology and cognate disciplines met in Heidelberg to establish the Global Network of Research Centers for Theology, Religious and Christian Studies. The vision for this linking of some of the most significant centres of research was developed by Prof. Michael Welker of Heidelberg.

At its heart the Global Network has four major aims. First, it seeks to establish closer collaborative relationships between scholars working in shared areas of research. The second aim is the purpose that stimulated the development of the Global Network. That is to facilitate the development of doctoral students through exchange with other institutions in the Network. The vision is to provide gifted doctoral students with the opportunity to work in another academic context which would provide further resources or supervision to develop the research necessary for writing their major dissertation. To use some management-speak, this is seen as part of the process of ‘value-adding’ to the individual’s project as well as enhancing the quality of research undertaken at doctoral level as a contribution to the wider discipline. Expressed in less management focused terms, it is simply a co-ordinated exercise in sharing expertise and resources in the best tradition of scholarship where ideas are freely exchanged, discussed and disseminated. Thus, participation and partnership are intended to be hallmarks of the Global Network’s vision for mentoring doctoral students on their pathway to developing as independent junior researchers in their own right. The final two aims are part of the larger scholarly endeavour, but the Network wishes to formally articulate these in its statement of purpose in order to express an ongoing commitment to the ideals of collaboration and communication between scholars. Therefore, thirdly, it seeks to foster the exchange of academic publications and scholarly information. This is not simply ‘blue-sky’ aspirational-talk, rather it has a practical application in seeking ways to democratize the learning process and the pursuit of knowledge in a global community, by removing potential barriers stemming from geographical constraints which at times hinder research. Related to this is the fourth aim, that of developing joint research activities or other academic activities such as conference and colloquia that enhance the other aims of the Network.

Admittedly, the Network is in its early stages of development – although it is probably better described as a fledgling stage, than an embryonic period. This initial meeting in Heidelberg took some significant steps forward to enable the activities of the Network to take place. Because of bureaucratic problems that often exist in establishing institutional agreements (due to financial considerations) it was deemed to be most expedient to have an agreement between individual scholars who are part of various research centres. While some representatives from smaller schools, or departments of theology or religious studies had been empowered to commit their institutions, others, while fully committed to the aims of the Network, did not have this institutional mandate. Consequently an approach was adopted which was both flexible and workable – namely that participants would formally configure their commitment to the Global Network in whichever form was most acceptable to their institution, and by so doing this would assist the interchange of doctoral students and research collaborations in the immediate future, rather than allowing the process to be bogged down in administrative negotiations. Thus, the preferred route adopted by many of the collaborating institutions is to confer the status of ‘visiting postgraduate student’ (or a similar label) on doctoral students who visit a host institution. Access

would be granted to the library resources, a number of supervisory sessions will be conducted by the mentor of the visiting student at the host institution, and assistance may be given in finding accommodation. The length of an exchange is envisaged to be normally for a period of one or two terms (or approximately in the range of three to six months). During the period of exchange the visiting doctoral (or post-doctoral) student remains a student of the home institution and in this way incurs no fees at the visiting institution. However, depending on the regulations at the host institution, the visiting student will be able to audit lecture courses and participate in departmental seminars.

The vision of the Global Network is, as its name suggests, to be truly global. While a number of leading institutions were represented from Western Europe and North America, the initial meeting also brought together leading academics from Eastern Europe, South America, Israel, Africa and Asia. From the Asian context three colleagues spoke of the facilities and research directions in their own institutions. Prof. Fei Wu, of Peking University, Beijing, spoke of the growth of religious studies in China and his own expertise in Augustine studies – working on a Chinese translation of the works of Augustine – was testimony to the renaissance of interest in the study of religion as a cultural phenomenon in China. Two representatives from Taiwan were also present. Dr Yang-En Cheng, from the Taiwan Theological College and Seminary, Taipei, stressed the heritage of the institution which traces its origins back to 1872. The Taiwan Theological College has a strong faculty team and has had a major impact for well over a century on the dissemination of graduate theological education in the South-East Asian context. By contrast, the other institution represented from Taiwan, Chung Yuan Christian University, Chung Li, Taiwan, was described by Dr Jing-Jong Luh as a vibrant and innovative institution with a short history but already boasting a large impact. Although the Graduate School of Religion was founded as recently as 2000, it has already developed a research focus in the area of the interaction between the Western and Sino-Christian scholarships since the nineteenth century.

There were two representatives from South Africa, who spoke openly about the financial constraints of sending students to study abroad, but were positive concerning the scholarly exchange that could take place by receiving students into their respective institutions. Andries Du Plooy, from North-West University, described the multi-campus nature of his institution with theology located at the Potchefstroom site. A particular focus of Prof. Du Plooy's own research is in the area of church-state relations, those interested in church polity and the civil state would be able to gain a uniquely African perspective on the issues surrounding this field of research. The second institution to be represented from South Africa was Stellenbosch University, apart from detailing the varied research interests particularly in the area of ecumenical studies from a reformed perspective, Prof. Dirkie Smit painted a sensuous verbal picture (assisted with powerpoint images) of the beautiful landscape of the Western Cape, with Stellenbosch nestled in a fertile wine growing region! However, he also emphasized the rich theological heritage of Stellenbosch as a centre of reformed theology.

One representative from South America was present, Wilhelm Wachholz of Escola Superior de Teologia, São Leopoldo, Brazil. The three members of the Global Network from this institution have research interests in feminist theology, gender issues and sexual violence (Prof. Elaine Gleci Neuenfeldt), Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Dialogue (Prof. Rudolf von Sinner), and the Construction of Lutheran Identity in Brazil (Prof. Wilhelm Wachholz). Eastern Europe was represented by Prof.

Yuri Zudov of St. Tikhon's Orthodox University Moscow. Outlining the strengths of his institution, he highlighted the possibilities of studying Orthodox Christianity in the Russian context, spoke of his own research into the emergence of charismatic and pentecostal movements in Russia, and fascinated fellow participants with a description of the training and study available in the restoration and analysis of icons and other forms of Orthodox art. The meeting also heard from Prof. Guy Stoumsa, of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Prof. Stoumsa's own interests lie in the area of the religious history of the Mediterranean world and the Near East in late antiquity. However, he also emphasized the possibility of research into Jewish-Christian relations in the modern period which could be facilitated at the Hebrew University.

Although the network is bigger in size, among those representing institutions from North America and Western Europe at the initial meeting of the Global Network were the following scholars:

Martien E. Brinkman & Cornelis van der Kooi (VU University, Amsterdam)
Pia Søltoft (University of Copenhagen)
Paul Foster (University of Edinburgh)
Peter Lampe, Klaus Tanner & Michael Welker (University of Heidelberg)
Eeva Heiskanen (University of Helsinki)
Jan-Olav Henriksen (MF Norwegian School of Theology, Oslo)
Erhard Blum (University of Tübingen)
Christopher Beeley (Yale University)
Konrad Schmid (University of Zurich)

Each of these centres has multiple research foci, which can be more fully explored through the website of the Global Network of Research Centers:

(http://www.globalnetresearch.org//index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1).

Some opportunities exist for highly specialized and dedicated research, such as the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre, University of Copenhagen, Denmark. Obviously for those engaged in the study of the thought of Kierkegaard, time spent at this centre would be an absolute necessity. Many of the other institutions are renowned for their rich heritage of research in a number of sub-disciplines in theology. In addition a number of Universities were unable to send representative to this initial meeting.

The Global Network has been set up with a number of visionary aspirations, but these are attainable because of the commitment to and enthusiasm for its goals as expressed by participants at this initial meeting. The size of the Network may increase slightly, especially to include areas of the world not yet incorporated – such as Australia, or New Zealand. However, there was a firm commitment to forming this initial configuration of institutions into a workable, functional and sustainable entity, before seeking any large-scale expansion. At its heart, the Network has the aspiration to foster the development of junior researchers engaged in doctoral programmes. This will occur by opening up access to major research centres and resources, but also by allowing junior scholars to work collaboratively and to form their own communities of cutting-edge research.

At this stage the financial burden for the visiting postgraduate student falls on the student and their home institution. A further goal is to find sources of funding to enable the payment of costs and stipends to students from locations where it would otherwise be impossible to participate in the programme. At this stage the Global Network has taken an initial, but highly significant step. The next stage is to commence the actual exchange of students. As this happens there will be ongoing reports to communicate the development and research outcomes from the Network.

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